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SUBJECT: TURKEY: URBAN POOR LEERY OF MODERN COMFORT

REF: A. 08 ISTANBUL 435  
[1](#)B. 08 ISTANBUL 166  
[1](#)C. 06 ANKARA 6580

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Urban renewal remains problematic in Turkey. Today's gecekondus (illegally built shanty houses) are a visible reminder of the rapid influx of rural migrants into the cities. The GOT wishes to develop the land occupied by these gecekondus into modern high rises with the aim of beautifying, modernizing, and urbanizing low-income neighborhoods. The GOT has directed Turkey's Mass Housing Authority (TOKi) to provide alternative housing to gecekondu occupants that it deems suitable for today's Turkey. Many gecekondu residents, however, are opposed to centralized urbanization since it disturbs their traditional lifestyle. As a result, they resent the GOT initiatives. Despite the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) attempts to parlay this free housing into political support, many gecekondu residents appear unwilling to fall in line. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Behiye Taskin is a hairdresser in Ankara. She was born in a Turkish village and raised in an Ankara gecekondu. (NOTE: "Gecekondu" is a term for illegally built slum housing and literally means "built overnight." END NOTE) Behiye's family sold their gecekondu to a contractor and moved into an apartment. Her parents, however, grew to detest apartment living because it was so removed from village traditions. It did not have a garden for fruits and vegetables, friendly neighbors, or room for farm animals. Behiye's parents, like many other rural migrants, returned to their village in hopes of reclaiming their old lifestyle. Behiye, however, remained in her family's apartment in Ankara and opened up a beauty salon. She is resigned to living in the city center, but wishes she could return to the old days. Behiye's story resembles that of many ex-gecekondu residents. Few families return to their villages. Many gecekondu families who sold their homes and relocated to a high rise apartment eventually moved to another gecekondu in search of their previous lifestyle.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Turkey began to see major squatter settlement trends in Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir in the late 1940s and again in the 1990s. These urban centers lacked the proper infrastructure for rural migrants, which forced them to construct illegal shanty houses in both the outskirts and centers of the cities. The typical gecekondus were made of stone or brick and consisted of a single floor, a garden, and a wooden roof. This eased the new migrants' transition to an urban setting by allowing them to be self-sufficient in village-type housing. Behiye Taskin said she remembers family meals on the floor, the produce her mother grew in their garden and the overall sense of community she experienced in the gecekondu neighborhood.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Women at the Yildiz Literacy Center shared similar

viewpoints with us on their quality of life as gecekondu residents. One woman at the center said she was born in Ankara, moved to a village and decided to return to a gecekondu in the outskirts of Ankara. She said that the quality of life in gecekondu was relatively high since, unlike her village home, it had water and electricity. Despite these women's fond memories, however, GOT officials view gecekondu as an obstacle for political and economic development. They contend these houses are of lower quality and lack basic utilities. PM Erdogan has routinely criticized squatters and has advocated for the elimination of "ghettos," especially those surrounding the Ankara airport. (Ref C)

15. (SBU) In 2000, the GOT assigned all housing projects to Turkey's Mass Housing Authority (TOKi). TOKi's primary mission is to tear down gecekondu and replace them with modern apartments. In a recent discussion with us, Head of Strategy and Development at TOKi Gul Deliktas noted that TOKi's key goal is to work with the GOT to create a model framework for quality low-cost housing. He said municipal governments remain resolute about tearing down gecekondu and transferring their inhabitants into new TOKi apartments.

16. (SBU) Still, many gecekondu residents have had a difficult time making the transition. Sincan Sub-Province's Municipal Assembly Member Orhan Kaya told us that adaptation to life in high rises is difficult. There is a lack of space, new neighbors are strangers, the apartments are unsuitable for raising animals and growing produce, and the residents quickly become aware of social class differences. Deliktas added that TOKi has built 360,000 apartments for

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low-, middle- and high-income classes nationwide. (NOTE: TOKi reported building over 36,000 luxurious apartments in order to subsidize the costs of building low-income housing. END NOTE) Many ex-gecekondu residents claimed that life in high-rises is financially unsustainable. Former squatters are expected to pay the difference between the value of their old property (sold to contractors or the municipalities) and the new apartments. They often borrow large amounts in loans from private banks in order to provide the municipality with a required ten percent down payment as well as additional monthly installments for the remaining price difference (Ref C). In the end, despite TOKi's and the GOT's efforts, many of these new residents sell their modern apartments and move into other gecekondu areas.

17. (SBU) Despite the apparent inclination of the urban poor to vote for the Justice and Development Party (AKP), gecekondu residents are often critical of the system and its failure to provide adequate support. During the last local elections, opposition party members alleged that AKP distributed refrigerators and other big ticket household items to gecekondu and rural households in exchange for their votes. Despite this largesse, however, many gecekondu voters seem unusually quick to blame the ruling party for any deficiencies in their lives. (NOTE: A poll by a well-known research company, Konda, indicates that neighborhoods where new migrants first settle do not support a single political party. END NOTE) Behiye Taskin told us she felt insulted when AKP members passed out basic needs goods (such as cake and pasta) in exchange for her vote. Cake, she said, was something she could afford on her own.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: TOKi President Erdogan Bayraktar ranks gecekondu as Turkey's third largest problem after terrorism and foreign debt. Many gecekondu residents, however, take a different view and argue that the GOT is disturbing their way of life. Urban transformation advocates continuously attempt to urbanize gecekondu residents, but face an uphill struggle. Sincan Sub-province's Municipal Assembly Member, Orhan Kaya, a previous gecekondu resident himself, stressed the importance of education and alternative housing. He recommended low-density housing, such as one- or two-level

townhouses with enough yard space for a garden. Cities like Ankara certainly have the space on the outskirts for such housing, but the overall costs would certainly be higher. For the moment, TOKi appears undeterred from building more high-rise apartments, creating a cycle that reinforces poverty and isolation.

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